

OVERVIEW OF THE FOLK THEATRE OF RAJASTHAN

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The moment one considers the folk theatre of Rajasthan, all the salient features of folk and traditional forms of entertainment from different states and regions come to mind. Rajasthan is probably the only state which can boast of representative folk and traditional forms of all the states and regions. In the colourful panorama of the Rajasthani Folk theatre one can find shades of *Kuravanji* by the gypsies of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar's *Bidesia*, Assam's *Ankia*, Braj's romantic *Raas*, Bengal's *Naqab*, Mithila's *Kirtania*, Maharashtra's *Lavani* and *Tamasha*, Tamilnadu's *Terukuttu*, Uttar Pradesh's *Ram Lila*, *Bhagat and Nakal*; Himachal's *Kariala*, Haryana's *Swang*, Gujrat's *Bhavai*, North Bihar's *Jat Jatin*, Tanjore's *Dashavatar*, *Gondhal* and *Dalit*; Bengal's *Jatra* and, Karnataka's *Doddata*. Apart from these lively, popular and deep rooted traditions, Rajasthan has *Khayal*; *Dangals* (musical bouts or competitions) like *Hela*, *Kanhayya*, *Dhappali* and *Bhent*. It has moving tableau theatre like *Nahan*. There are evening *lilas* performed in the temples on the eve of Narsingh Chaturdashi. Here is *Rama Raas* along with *Krishna's Raas*. There is Bisau's *Rama Khelia* like the Nepal *Ramkhelias*. There are scores of musical festivals, theatre competitions and *khyals* of numerous variety and style.

It is difficult to pin-point the origins of theatre in Rajasthan. One can however surmise that the theatre had its roots in the cult of worship, impersonation of gods, singing and dancing to propitiate the divine spirits and the hymns sung to praise mighty gods and goddesses, at shrines and other religious places.

Rawals of Rajasthan who visit their distinguished clients (*Charan Yajamans*) for gifts (*virats*) would impersonate in various disguises (*Swangs*) and perform various acts of entertainments—called *Ramats*. I was told on enquiry that the Rawals, in earlier times, would impersonate the goddesses they worshipped during *Navaratri*s and would sing devotional songs (*Charjayan*) to the accompaniment of *mridanga*, *taal* and *rawaj* etc. With the passage of time they started playing *kheras* in front of Charans also and

presented different impersonations (*swangs*). For a *Khera* performance a boy would dress up like the goddess and another boy in his female garb would present various *Charjas* throughout the night laced with songs, dance and drums. These devotional performances came to be known as *Ramats*. *Veer Vinod*, a book of that period, records an incident which shows the popularity of these *Ramats*, in the reign of Maharana Mokal. On a particular day when all the Singhal population of Jetaran had gone away to witness a *Ramat*, Narvad of Mandovar came on his chariot and kidnapped Supiyarde whom he took away in male attire. This incident occurred around 1454 Bikrami Samvat. In Rawal's performance comic incidents such as Mataji, Bora Bori, Pathan and Bikaji are very famous. In Bikaji's *Khel* (play) a good example of the royal household is presented through the verse-prose dialogues of Bikaji, Ratna Patar and a servant named Nasa. This play demonstrates the quick wit of Rawals along with their artistry and creative improvisation in ample abundance.

I had heard an almost similar story regarding the origin of *Bhavai* folk form. About four hundred years ago a man called Nanga of the Naga clan used to live in Phulia Kekdi. He was very fond of singing and dancing, hence he was driven out of the community for this vile act. Struck by the onslaught of small pox, he went into the temple of goddess Sheetala. The goddess appeared before him and told him that he should impersonate her and sing and dance in her honour as part of her worship and service. If he would do so, everything would be alright. This he did. Blessed by the goddess, he was cured immediately and the fury of the attack subsided. When his people came to know about this incident, they jointly procured a *nakkara* drum, lance, *bhongal* and *jajim* (carpets) and other costly costumes and honored Nanga with these offerings. Since then many people who had been abandoned by their societies or driven away from their villages, would get together and start performing in like manner as strolling players. These gypsy players came to be known as *Bhamais* which gradually changed into *Bhavais*.

Tribal Plays

The story of the origin of *Gavari*, a folk form of Adivasis (Bhils) which has gained currency is a mixture of many such stories and legends. It is a pointer, all the same, as to how old these forms are. Once goddess Amba dreamt a scene which involved the kingdom of Vasuki, the king of *Pataal* and a Vat Vriksha where *navaratra* worship was enacted. In a ballad regarding *Gavari*, names like Unvas, Dewal Unva, Badalia Hindva, Mansrovar, Dharnagar, Jawad etc. are mentioned. When I tried to locate them, I found them all around Haldighati, the area inhabited by these *Adivasis*. Unnva is a small village in this area. An old temple of Devalmalia's Peeplaj is also located here—considered to be supreme deity here. This place is even now called Dewal Unnva. Here one finds a stone inscription also in Kutil script dating 1016 Vikramsamvat. The legendary tree of Vasuki's garden is still

there at a distance of $1\frac{1}{2}$ kilometer. Ballads inform us that this tree was spread over 12 *bighas* and its leaves were as big as *thalis* (trays) and of golden colour. Supreme diety of *adivasis*, Shankar-Mahadev is the main character of this *Gavari*. He stays out of the main play and controls the events from outside. He is known as Buriya.

Through the ages this *Gavari* was enriched by various traditions, substractions, weeding out of scripts and incorporation of current events in different periods of history. During the British regime even the Britisher became a character in this *Gavari*. All the players are *adivasis*. Around Rakshabandan, an auspicious time is decided to start the performances which are held in a village square, near a temple or some other open space available for the purpose. The month long performances start around a *Trishul* which is dug in the center of the square. People sit around the place of performance, on the trees, roof tops, on the hill-hillocks. They watch the performances sitting, standing, reclining and like a floating crowd in the melas. One village has only one performance in a day. Performers move to the next village next day. The whole performance is treated as a religious *anushtan* ceremony. Buriya is the traditional hero and Rai the heroine. It has numerous short skits of humorous nature. *Kalka*, *Minna*, *Nat*, *Kanjar Kanjari*, *Kheturi*, *Shankariya*, *Kalbelia*, *Bania*, *Paiyata*, *Jogi*, *Kangujari*, *Kalukir*, *Banjara*, *Bhopa*, *Banwari*, *Goma*, *Fatta Fatti*, *Bagli*, *Banjari*, *Devar-bhojai*, *Bhanwara*, *Kharlyabhoot*, *Hathiya*, *Bhinyawal*, *Sur*, *Reenchhari*, *Naar* etc. are the performances which present the ethos, colour and culture of Bhil life and civilization. This is probably the most ancient of the folk traditions which still contain the flavour of antiquity.

Out of all these *lila*-based impersonations, Sankadikon's *lilas* are unique in character. About 300 years ago, Haridas, son of Govardhandas of Ghosunda was married in the village of Sava, but he died young. To maintain his relations with his son's-in-law, he decided to take a statue of *Shaligram* and marry him to the plant of *Tulsi* of the in-laws. That night god appeared in his dreams and asked him not to vow for Swarana Daan in Kanya Daan. Bhagatji forgot this. As penance he decided to end his life. At that time Chaturbhuj, clad in yellow attire, appeared before him and gave him his crown of peacock feathers and asked him to present his two *lilas* from Ashvin Shukla Trayodashi to the full moon. He told him that he would visit him in some guise or the other during this period.

Since then *Sankadik lilas* are played only for these three days. Ganesh, Sanak, Sanandan, Snatan, Santkumar etc. are the characters in these *lilas*. Apart from Ganesha, all others have long hair and beards, with sandal-wood paste applied to their bodies. They enact Narsingha Avatar killing Hiranyakashayapa. Deities wear masks which are kept in the Bhagatji's temple, away from the sun light, and brought out only for three days in a year. Those who participate also get a *guntharia* (rope) of jute.

On Kartika Shukla's *puṇima* (full-moon) a *lila* of the same name is presented at Bassi, a place near Chitorgarh. Tableaus of Ganesha, Brahma Kalika, Kala, Gora, Hiranyakashyapa, Narsinghavatar etc. are taken out. All these characters wear masks. In the village Gijgarh near Jaipur on the eve of Narsingha Chaturdashi a performance called *Kadra Bhutra* is presented in the courtyard of Narsingha temple in which Narsingha, Prahalad, Narada, Ganesha, Holika, Shukracharya, Mahadev and Bhutra Kadra appear in elegant guises. Apart from Mahadev all other characters wear masks. Shukracharya's mask has only one eye giving it a comic contour. Kadra Bhutra wear black clothes.

Various kinds of processions, tableau wagon-stages which are brought out on the occasion of Holi festival make the fabric of folk traditions of Rajasthan more colourful. Sangod's *Nahan*, a procession brought out on the banks of a river near Kota. Known for its gaiety all over the country, this procession presents a unique scene when viewed from the river banks. Seven children are taken out in procession as the seven goddesses from the temple of Brahimini Mata. Other characters who appear in the *swangs* etc. include Chacha Bohra, Seth, Munim, Blacksmith, Gypsy, Irani, Laila-Majnu, Salim-Anarkali, Sheerin-Farhad etc. Eunuchs from all over the country participate in this festival. The procession of *Badshah-Vazir* is unique. Similar processions are also worth seeing in Beawar and Pali.

In Udaipur, on the day of Dulehndi, a procession of *Daki* used to be taken out. Oil-pressers (*telies*) used to organise this procession. They would plaster a man with mud and put him on an upturned charpai and present him as *Daki*. On Rang Panchimi day, Sandi muslims used to take out Dhola-Marū procession from Baddu Bhagtan's gate near Jagdish Chowk. They enjoyed the patronage of the royal house for this procession. On one camel Dhola would sit with his two Marwanis and on the other a Sadhu would sit with *mussal* in one hand and a *hooka* in the other. The procession would reach the Palaces and the Charwadars would present an act of elephants, a very picturesque *swang* for the occasion. The whole of Shekhawati would vibrate with the Gindar dance on the eve of Holi. Men dance in circles wearing a variety of costumes and impersonating a number of characters. Mewar's '*Ghers*' are also well known for their unique features and variety of styles. A study of *swangs* by *ghers* can be very fruitful by itself. At places these *ghers* wear blouses, heavy tasseled with precious stones and metals weighing upto 30 kilogram and costing not less than a thousand rupees.

On Ganesh Chaturthi *Chauk Chandni*, a festival of children, is celebrated in the open courtyards or village squares in the moon light. Only children participate in these plays. Most of these relate to the celestial beings. Around Ramgarh and Churu, at one time, the prostitutes would impersonate men and present *Cheera* dance on the eve of marriages. They would wear the turban with special *Cheera*, bandage, thus giving the name to the dance.

Around Karoli, professional troupe of cobblers and doms would present *swangs* at marriages.

Apart from *Ram lila* and *Raas lila*, other *lilas*, also, have distinctive traditions in Rajasthan. Jamuna Shyaman started Bisau's *Ramlila* with children. In this special *Ramlila* all characters excepting Rama brothers and Sita, wear masks and the whole action is presented in pantomime.

Patunda's *Ramlila* is presented in Haraoti. Eight to ten persons sing *alaap* in this *lila*. This is held in front of Lakshmi Narayan temple. Villages around this place have been encouraged to start *lilas* of their own. Before the *lilas* came into existence *Samya* was enacted for three days. *Samya* would begin from Ram's birth and would end with the *Dhanush Yagna* episode. Goswami Tulsidas's *manas* has been the basis for the *Ramlila* in Bharatpur. Mahant Ganga Das has done a lot to make this a remarkable presentation. Different scenes of this *lila* are presented at different places. There are scores of such *lila* troupes in Rajasthan.

Ramlila of the Jurhara village of Kama tehsil of Bharatpur uses many scripts including Keshav's *Ramchandrika*, Tulsi's *Manas*, Radheyshyam's *Ramayana* and a local poet Pt. Shobharam's *lavanias*. Tableaux dominate the mixed style of presentation. The whole village is turned into the place of performance. Children under the age of 13 years act as Rama brothers and Sita. Thakur Devi Singh is the chief patron of this *lila*.

Raas lila in Rajasthan is different from that of Braj. Instead of the religious elements, these *lilas* have better artistic presentation in the songs, dances, stage craft, *pandals* etc. Only the celestial beings are allowed to sit while other characters like seth, sahukar etc. stand in attendance. In the yearly fair of the famous Beneshwar Tirth, Sad people celebrate Rasmandal. It is believed that the Ras which was left incomplete at Braj is completed here. This was the boon which these people got from Lord Krishna and so these Sad-weavers started worshipping Mauji in the form of Krishna. In this Mandal Krishna wears a *gherdar ghaghra* (wide skirt) and puts a crown on his head.

Like *Ramlila* and *Raaslila*, *Rasdhari* is also popular in this area. Episodes from Rama's exile till his return to Ayodhya are presented in this form. They do not have intricate dances like *Raaslila*. This is a *Khyal-based lila* which presents an orchestral composition called *Gajar* in the beginning.

Rasdhari started with presenting abridged *Raaslila*, at Godwad, but the credit of enacting it in *khyal* form goes to a Brahmin named Moti Lal of Mewar, who himself was a very good artist and *khyal* writer. During the research tour of Phulera I came to know that this was a very important area for family traditions. Around a century ago, there were more than a hundred

parties of Kumawats performing in the areas. *Raasdhari* was popular in Mewar mainly. Other sectors also had *lilas* in this form. In Bhil Kangoojri, Devi and Hathia forms of *lila*, one can notice that these are extensions of the traditional *lilas*.

Khyal and Dangal

Khyal is another form which is very popular in this area apart from *Jwangs* and *lilas*. The origin of *Khyal* is surrounded in a number of incidents. Tukhangiri is an important name in *Khyal*—inspired by Tukhangiri a Hindu saint of Chanderi of Madhya Pradesh and Shah Ali—a muslim saint. Dangals of Baithaki style of these *khyals* were no less popular. Two groups would sit facing each other. These groups would consist of quick-wits, instant poets, expert singers and musicians. They would debate amongst themselves and the competition would go on entertaining the audience. One group would raise a topic and the other would reply in the same coin. Questions and answers would be presented in identical rhythm, metre and beat.

Around Karoli Shrimahavirji one finds such a *Khyal* called *Hela* which begins with *Naubat's* tune and goes through the *Devi-ki-Sumarni* (hymns) and climaxes into *Hela's Peed* where the main topic is brought into the show. After the *Peed*, *Khyal's* climax starts, a group of singers in their highest notes would sing *Aji Ae Ho* and *hela*. From here the *hela* would branch off into various *ragas* and *raginis*, rhythms, couplets etc. Instruments include *Daphli*, *Chang*, *Chimta*, *Nand*, *Turui* etc. Like *Kajali dangals* one can find excellent examples of *Phathabazi* and *Bardastabazi* in these *Helas*.

Bedi Basedi area of Dholpur is famous for Bhent *Dangal* where groups of ten or twenty face each other as competitors. *Daphali* and *Kanahaya* are other important names in such other *Dangals*.

Another different style is in vogue in Rajasthan called *Sangeet Dangal*. After the harvest in Chaitra Baisakh in the open fields these *dangals* are organised. From any cast or creed people come and present their shows. *Dhol*, *Nagara*, *Sarangi*, *Jhanjh*, Harmonium are brought by each group. It presents a very interesting picture when one finds one person dangling a harmonium, the other a *Dhol*. Someone may have a *Sarangi* and the other a *Jhanjh* in his hand. Two huge *Nakkaras* are kept on both sides of the field. One person sings a couplet in the beginning and the others join in later. They use different gestures and postures, beat, time, and *khatkas*. Some do acrobatic tricks in between time-beats and end the act on the proper beat to get the applause from the audiences. These *Dangals* continue day and night for many days without break.

Before the *Manchiya khyal* and *baithaki khyal* and musical *dangals*, one finds that there were two variations of *Uthaki khyal*. A study would reveal

that *Baithaki khyal* graduated into *Uthaki khyal* which turned into the musical *dangals* before taking the present form of *khyal* which is very popular in the region.

Apart from Turkilangi *Khyal* Rajasthan has Shekhavati, Kuchhamani, Chiravi, Ali Gakshi, Hatharasi, Nageri *khyals*. All these have distinct features separating them from one another—difference in singing, dancing and presentation. They set up their own stages and present plays of contemporary life, legends and stories. Influenced by Hatharasi and Nautanki *khyals*, these are known by the same name here. Gandharvas present religious *khyals* in front of Jainis. These are called Gandharva *khyals*.

Khyals presented on the eve of holi are called *Rammat* which is popular in Bikaner and Jaisalmer area. *Gopichand Ka Tamasha* of Amer is very popular on the eve of Holi, Dulehndi and Chaiti Amavasa. Bansidhar Bhatt started this. Ranjha Heer, Gopichand, Roopchand Gandhi, Mian Joothan, Chhailapanihari Ka Tamasha have been also drawing packed houses. Gopikrishnaji is the main organiser. The characters use dust as make-up and wear saffron clothes.

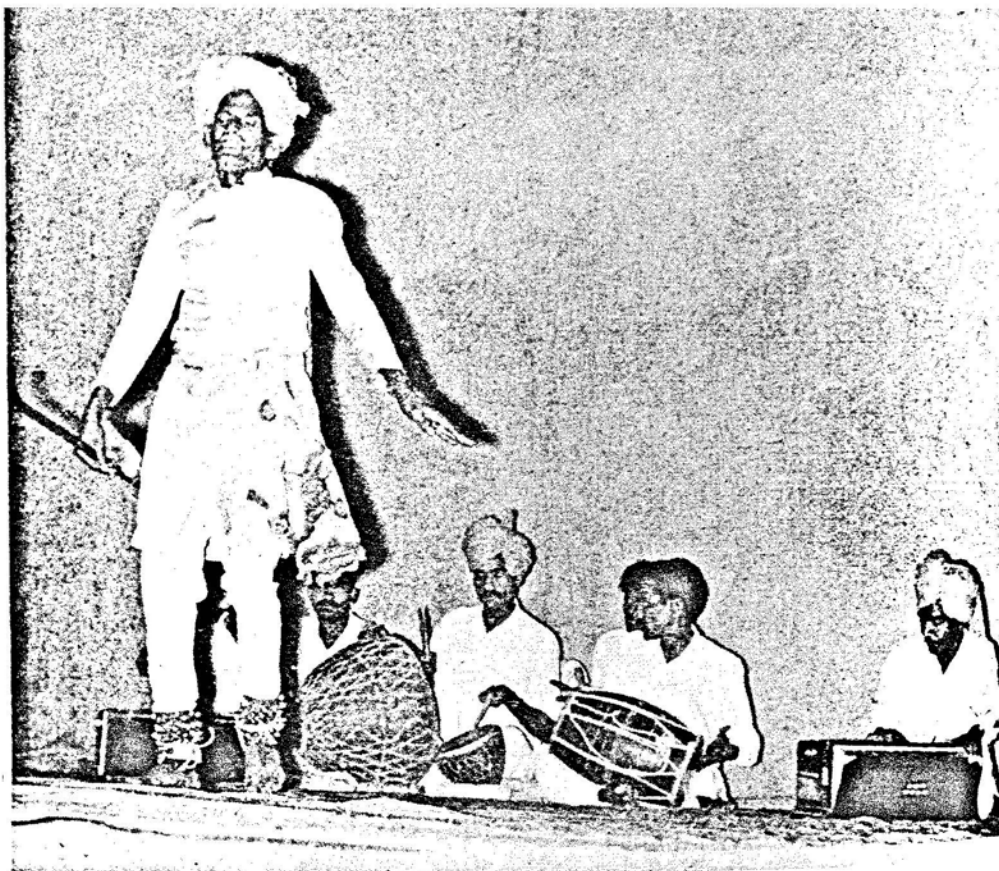
All these *Khyals* have different groups, masters and areas of performance. Stages are also constructed of different designs and artistry. Turkilangi *Khyals* have multistory sets which are decorated with different flags etc. Many *Khyals* have miracles performed. Hatharasi *Khyals'* promoter Nattharam was also from Rajasthan. Once Nattharam was performing in a village Shyamji-ki-Khatu. He was playing the role of Amar Singh and his nephew, the role of Ramsingh. During the play he was supposed to hit Ramsingh with a sword. He hit him hard and his nephew died on the spot. On the particular moment an offer (a *mannat*) was given to Shyamji and the boy started breathing. Since then every year he used to come there to perform. After his death, his heirs are continuing the tradition of performing every year at the temple.

The royal houses used to patronise these performances. After independence the interest has waned. But still a number of forms are alive, popular and performed extensively in Rajasthan. Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal has done considerable work in this direction under the guidance of Shri Devilal Samar. The contribution of the State Sangeet Natak Akademi is also commendable.

(Translated from original in Hindi by J.N. Kaushal)

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Nanu Ilya. Khyal player (above) Comic interlude from a folk-play (left).



Shakuntala Devi—traditional dancer in Khyal plays.



*Masked dancer-hero of Gauri play (left) Dhol-player-accompanies the Swaag plays (below)
(Photos author).*

